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ABSTRACT

The example of the Cincinnati (Ohio) Public Schools demonstrates that involving taxpayers in school district budgeting can generate school improvement. This financially troubled district decided in 1979-80 to (1) fully inform the public of the schools' financial position; (2) involve the public in improving that position; (3) involve the public in budgeting; (4) establish long-term community participation; and (5) give each neighborhood power over spending in its school. A school district should initiate such a process by requesting the community's help at an informational meeting with as much attendance as possible. A subsequent community meeting should establish a permanent advisory committee; after training in the budget process, this committee should then set rules for community participation and report to the community the status of the project. Having completed this step, the Cincinnati district is establishing a budget committee for each school, comprised of school staff and students and community members. Each year these committees prepare the district budget based on the administration's draft; first, however, they must set educational goals--the real aim of community participation. Using this process, the Cincinnati schools have gained revenue and credibility and have realized improvements in achievement, enrollment, attendance, and retention of white students. (MCG)

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G. David Schiering
Cincinnati Public Schools

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WE CAN PROVE THAT PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT IMPROVES SCHOOLS

This clinic has been advertised as one in which we will prove that public involvement improves schools. That is, I must admit, a rather tall order. Nonetheless, I think we will be able to pass even the Federal Trade Commission's standards on fair advertising, because we will share with you the development and implementation of a process of community involvement which we have found exciting and rewarding. It is, of course, difficult to prove the cause and effect relationship between the establishment of this process and a number of improvements which our district has experienced, but we do know that the process is working and that improvements have been experienced.

What we are presenting to you today is our experience in implementing a process in which taxpayers in general, and local school communities in particular, have a meaningful role in determining how their money will be spent, in their schools, for the education of their children. I emphasize the word "their" at each

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step because the process recognizes that while we Board members are elected officials responsible for setting policy, and while the administrators are the professionals who are trained to implement that policy, nonetheless the public schools are ultimately owned by the public - and if you own something, you have a right to participate in how it operates.

The nature of that participation has always been an issue. Undoubtedly, all of you have recognized at some time that community involvement is beneficial. In all likelihood you already have some program in place which addresses this need at least in part. We are not here to advocate merely for community involvement but rather to suggest one means to that end which we have found successful. Quite bluntly, that means is a process which allows people to get their hands on the money. For reasons that are not always apparent, people feel that the power of a system lies with the decisions about how to spend the money. Our process shares that power.

Let me give you some information about Cincinnati Public Schools so that you can know us better and place our presentation in context. We are a school system of about 50,000 students, 57% of whom are black. We have 80 separate school buildings, and a general fund budget this school year of $157 million dollars. Our general fund budget per pupil averages $3,000.

A desegregation suit has been pending against the district for almost 10 years - and tentative settlement was reached in that suit about 6 weeks ago.

Our city is a river town with a strong German heritage mixed with a moderate influx of Appalachian families and a black population which constitutes about 30% of the city population. There is a strong Catholic influence and well-established private and parochial schools. We have a background of conservatism and a solid economy that reacts slowly to both inflation and recession.

Our school board is generally conservative - of 7 members, 5 are Republicans and 2 are Democrats. Three of our 7 members are black.

We have a very advanced program of magnet schools, with 14,000 students enrolled in such schools or attending schools other than their neighborhood school under our open enrollment program.

Like most urban school districts across the country, Cincinnati was, by 1979, a district in very difficult financial straits. Increases in state aid had failed to keep pace with inflation, staff had not received adequate salary improvements and 7 consecutive tax levy proposals had failed. Public understanding of the schools' financial condition was lacking. Efforts to build credibility were unsuccessful. Persistent myths about "hidden funds" and "administrative fat" could not be

dispelled. It became clear that this condition could be eliminated only by giving to the public a meaningful and broad-based opportunity to participate in the financial affairs of the school system. I emphasize meaningful because previous efforts to release financial statements prepared by independent auditors, community task force reports and similar undertakings all had been unsuccessful. A remarkably sophisticated public was simply telling us that they could be persuaded only if they had the ability to conclude, and they themselves did conclude, that the financial need existed, and they had an opportunity to participate directly in examining the financial need and in determining how resources are used.

In late 1979 and early 1980 we set a course designed to accomplish the following conditions considered to be mandatory for goal of community involvement:

1. The public had to understand the financial condition of the schools - not be told what the condition was but rather to understand.

2. The public had to have a meaningful role in deciding what to do about that financial condition - not be told what we were going to do but rather to participate in the decision.

3. The public had to have a meaningful role in deciding how school funds would be used - not merely approve what had been decided but rather to be involved in the decision-making process.

4. The public had to feel confident that they would have a long term role of meaningful involvement in the process both at their local school and at the district-wide level - not just a one-time inducement to pass a tax levy, but rather a lasting relationship.

5. A local school community had to know that they would have both the ability and the authority to influence the way in which the monies allocated to their school were actually expended. That is, the concept of involvement had to mean true decentralization even as to such matters as how a local school would expend the money made available to it.

Obviously, to accomplish these conditions there had to be, on the part of the Board and administration, a genuine willingness to open the entire system to informed public scrutiny. I emphasize the word informed because the community will not feel involved if it doesn't understand a budget discussion. You can turn off community involvement real quick if you give a fast shuffle with complex financial statements which can be interpreted only by a financial wizard.

Now it is not easy for a Board and administration to be comfortable with the openness that is required to achieve meaningful community involvement. After all, there may be inequities in the allocation of financial resources among schools. There may be administrative expenditures

that are difficult to explain. There probably are highly paid administrators and there may even be some pet programs. You must embrace the philosophy that either the financial allocations are correct and supportable or they are not supportable and should be changed.

The openness which is required must be 100%. There is no middle ground - no cheating - no holding back. A good community person can smell a fraud a mile away. And if that label is applied to your effort, you might as well call it off for a few years - because it will never fly.

Now, if you believe that you are willing and able to risk this openness, and do in fact want to have meaningful community involvement including, even, some decentralization as to the use of funds, you at least have the conditions which are necessary to begin an exciting and productive journey. If those conditions are not present, then you will be best advised not to begin the journey - because it will in all likelihood be not just unproductive, but counter-productive.

Assuming that those necessary conditions are present, let's talk about getting started. I recognize that no two school districts are the same. What may work for one may be a flop in another. But I firmly believe that the first step you must take is to say clearly to the community that you are going to do something different - and you need help. This is generally difficult for school

board members because we like to say what we have been doing is right. But remember, one of the necessary conditions for success was a willingness to take some risks. If some of your board members are faint of heart, keep them out of the kitchen - but make sure you have their agreement in advance not to be critical.

Signaling the intention to do something different probably can best be accomplished through a Board committee. The determination of which committee may depend on the personalities on your various committees - but in most instances the finance committee is best suited for this task.

The committee should make a special effort in advance to gain extraordinarily high attendance at the meeting at which this new endeavor will be announced. Write personal letters to friends - communicate with community councils - call on the PTA and staff to spread the word - seek the attendance of the religious community (and then save those names for a mailing address which you will need many times in the future). Tell all of these people that you need their help and are going to begin the development of a new process which will permit them to help in a meaningful way. Tell them in general terms that the Board is about to develop a local school budgeting process which will permit the district budget to build from the bottom up, with each school manipulating its own

allocation of resources as it sees fit within certain guidelines and within the constraints of state and local law. Tell them that the Board has committed itself to this unique concept, but it will be up to those who involve themselves to design the process itself. Prepare a news release announcing the meeting and generally setting forth the new and exciting concept to which the Board has committed itself. And then hope for a good turnout and decent media coverage.

At the meeting, again lay out the basic concept of local school budgeting. Emphasize your desire to decentralize budget functions, the intention to have local school budget committees manipulate their own budgets that they believe will best meet their individual school's goals and, in general, the belief that taxpayers should have a greater voice in determining how their tax dollars are spent for education.

In the course of the meeting you can flesh out the concept. Describe in general terms what kinds of things can be done by a local school budgeting committee. Recognize that the members will have to attend training sessions to learn how the budget is created and what restrictions are placed on the budget. Be open about why you are developing this process and be clear that your ultimate purpose is to give the community a greater <u>sense</u> of ownership in schools which the community does in fact own. Emphasize

decentralization and the unique needs which schools have from one to the other.

Ask for questions and comments. Do not hesitate to respond that the answer is unknown and can be developed only as the community develops the process. In other words, let people know that this new thing will be shaped by those who participate and is not even close to being finalized. People must know that they can influence even the process in which they will be participating.

Hopefully, you have at this meeting one representative from every school in your district. If this is not likely to happen on its own, then be certain that your advance planning includes this in your effort. Because at the end of the first meeting you will want to obtain the name of one representative from each school to attend the next meeting - which will be designated as a working session to begin putting the process in place.

At this second meeting, go back over some of the concepts and look for suggestions on how to proceed. From here on, the process will be highly individualized from district to district. But I suggest that these representatives next select from among themselves a smaller group to be known as the Local School Advisory Committee. This Advisory Committee will be the guiding community force from here on - and its members should indicate in advance their willingness to serve for 2 or 3 years and

thereby provide the continuity which development of the program will require.

The Steering Committee should be the first to undergo training on the budget. You will be amazed at their reaction after they feel confident of their understanding about what previously had been a mysterious process. The Steering Committee then should have responsibility for setting up some of the ground rules -

1. Do local schools budgeting committees have any decision-making authority or is their role purely a recommending one?

2. What should be the membership make-up of the local school committee?

3. What role does the principal play?

4. Assuming that there is not sufficient administrative support for all schools to start immediately, which schools go first?

5. What is the chain of command in getting approval for a recommendation?

Once some general guidelines and preliminary goals have been set, then let the Steering Committee report to the community on the status of this project. Let them share their enthusiasm and belief that the commitment to openness and participation is a real one.

Our ultimate goal is to have in each school a local school budgeting committee consisting of the principal, staff, parents, non-parent community representatives and, at the secondary level, students. Those committee members are trained as to the budget, they know what the allocation will be for their school next year, they know what the allocations are for other schools next year, and they are ready to massage that budget to fit their goals.

Now, what tools do the committees have to accomplish this task? I want to share with you the two booklets which have become more or less the Bibles for information about our district. These booklets contain substantially all of the financial and other information which someone could want both for the district as a whole and for their individual school. Ultimately, we present in these books the financial, demographic and achievement details for every school in the district, and we present the details in a way which allows open comparisons between schools.

The Summary Budget Presentation is essentially an annual report, providing district-wide information on achievement (pages 3 - 5), enrollment and attendance (pages 6 - 7) and then more detailed budget information. If you will look at pages 19 and 20, you will see the first summary level presentation of the current year's budget

broken down by certified personnel, civil service personnel and (on page 20) non-personnel.

If you will turn to the Detail Budget Presentation - pages 2 and 3 - you will see this same detail budget which is the starting point for this detailed presentation.

I would like to take a few minutes to walk you through this book because it seems terribly complicated until you understand its simplicity.

Turn to page 9 - summary of <u>instructional</u> staff by school

to page 10

Anderson Place - follow <u>red</u>

Turn to page 211 - Central Functions

Follow red

Turn to page 255
Turn to page 257
Turn to page 258

Allocations - page 259 at 64

These books, which generally are printed during the summer before the school year to which they apply, are actually the <u>result</u> of the local school committees' work. The committees have before them the books for the

prior year and a proposed budget for the upcoming year. But the committees do have as their principal tool a draft presentation, of what ultimately will be in the book, for their school. They are ready, then, to begin massaging the proposed allocation to fit their belief as to how the money can best be used.

The realization that hits them, of course, is that they must first set the goals for their school. This is the real educational benefit of the process. No doubt you have had your ups and downs with trying to get the community involved in goal setting. With this process you have obtained community involvement primarily because people want to play with the money, but they cannot play with the money effectively until they struggle with the educational issues first and set the goals which they feel should be achieved.

Our Superintendent, Dr. James Jacobs, is going to describe how the process works at the local school level. This process is the most meaningful because it demonstrates that once you have the system in place, it does in fact work.

(Presentation by Dr. Jacobs)

While Dr. Jacobs properly can proclaim that the process works because our community really does participate, I am willing to go a little farther out on a limb and at least point out some of the improvements which we have realized since first presenting this process to the community:

1. After a dismal record of consecutive tax levy defeats, we passed a levy in the summer of 1980 and passed a second levy in the fall of 1983.

2. I have not been confronted with the first serious financial myth. The information is fully available and questions are readily answered.

3. Even though there are variations in the per pupil expenditures from school to school, claim of financial inequities have been minimal.

4. There has not been a single claim that the district is hiding money.

5. Student achievement scores for the district have improved every year.

6. Total student enrollment has remained constant after years of annual declines.

7. The racial composition of the district has remained constant after years of an annual decrease in the percentage of white students.

8. Attendance of both students and staff has improved.

9. Staff morale, as measured by district-wide tests, has improved.

10. Community perception of our schools, as measured by community-wide surveys, has improved.

Is all of this the result of a local school budgeting process? Who knows for sure. But maybe? Certainly some is. And if so, perhaps it's worth a try for your district too.